



## **Female Blackness in an Abyss of Racism, Sexism, and The Black Panther Party; A Hypocritical Society that Fought for Equality but Denied Its Own Members Basic Human Rights**

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Female Blackness in an Abyss of Racism, Sexism,  
and The Black Panther Party;  
A Hypocritical Society that Fought for Equality  
but Denied Its Own Members Basic Human Rights

Madison Givens

Time stopped. A single heartbeat was all she heard, as she watched bullets fly past, penetrating everything. Windows breaking, glass crashing to the ground. Her mattress she had been so soundly sleeping on riddled with holes as batting became engorged with a river of red. She clutched her belly as if she could protect the unborn child within her. The child who would grow up never knowing his father. A father who would die a martyr. A father whose wife watched his body punctured by machine guns. She never saw who pulled the trigger but she knew. They wore blue and took an oath to protect and serve. They would leave her with little means to provide for herself or her child. Deborah Johnson was her name. Her and her now deceased boyfriend Fred Hampton had rented this apartment to be closer to the Black Panther Headquarters. Society levied three charges against Johnson even before she rented her apartment and long before that violent night. Charge one: her black skin. Charge two: her female anatomy. Charge three: her membership status in the Black Panther Party. She will wake up with horrific nightmares every night for the rest of her life. She will experience post-traumatic stress disorder everyday as her mind slips back to the image of her boyfriend's lifeless body being filled with lead.

The trauma experienced by the aforementioned "Pantherette" was not uncommon for many women within the party. Women within the Black Panther Party suffered traumatic occurrences at the hands of police but also at the hands of fellow panthers. Society allows women, specifically black women, to be deemed lesser citizens. Their label within society allows for continued abuses to be rendered upon women of color. The level of abuse society allows to occur depends upon multiple factors – called intersectionalities. The oppressed female intersects with the oppressed African-American which intersects with membership in a stigmatized party. Women within the Black Panther Movement in the Bay Area (1960's-1970's) were confronted, both internally and externally, with discrimination and abuse due to racism, sexism, and Black Panther Party

membership; the critical role women played within the party was diminished by the intersectionality of being black, female, and a member.

“Three is a Magic Number”:

The Triple Threat of Being Black, Female, and A Panther

Intersectionalities are an emerging phenomenon. There are inherent differences in the portrayal of the Black Panther female and the “ordinary” female. The focus, however, is not to take away any one woman’s experience but it is to enhance our understanding of the women who comprised a marginalized majority in the Party. The Black Panther Party is a defining movement in our nation’s history and it is vital we understand the movement from multiple perspectives, one being from the women involved. There were more women within the movement<sup>1</sup>, making women the foundation of the party. Many women joined the movement as a means to combat racism and sexism that they experienced on a regular basis. They quickly found that they would have to fight sexism within the party, as well as the stigma surrounding being a Panther in society.

### Black Power

Mexico City, 1968. Olympians Tommie Smith (gold medalist) and John Carlos (bronze medalist) had just completed the 200 meter race. They stood on the podium awaiting their medals. The world watching as the Star Spangled Banner blares throughout the stadium. What they do next incites outrage in some, and hope in others. They raise on single gloved fist, heads bowed downward in protest of African American treatment in the United States. As the United States focused its efforts on the Vietnam War, there was another battle waging at home that was escalating to an unprecedented level<sup>2</sup>. African-Americans were demanding an end to segregation, racism, and much more. As leaders like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and even the Panthers own Huey Newton and Bobby Seale began calling for different forms of mobilization of the masses, the white men in power began to retaliate with violence (not to say that all African-

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<sup>1</sup> The Black Panthers – Vanguard of the Revolution

<sup>2</sup> Waldman (1982)

American protests were only peaceful). African-Americans at this point were tired of being denied rights that the Constitution claims belongs to all people.



## Miss America

The fight for Constitutional rights was not limited to African-Americans alone. The battle bled over to women's rights movements as women began demanding to be treated as first class citizens. Many women's rights movements emerged in response to other political and social events happening at the time. Women gained suffrage half a century after African-Americans. As women saw African-American protestors demanding rights they realized that they too had a voice and they needed to use it. Women began mobilizing following the realization of the rights they were still denied. On paper, the Black Panthers recognized this inequality and many members recognized that black freedom should go hand in hand with female freedom and equality. A newspaper article from the Black Panther Party went so far as to condemn the Miss America pageant. Stating that black women (specifically) should not participate as this pageant specifically objectifies and oppresses "sisters"<sup>3</sup>.



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<sup>3</sup> Black Panther Party Newspaper article on Miss America



### “Pantherettes”

“Sisters” in the Black Panther Party were already combating racism, and sexism in society. Once they joined the party, they no longer combated racism internally but they did find that there was a lot of gender based abuse within the party. Female panthers were subjected to all kinds of misogynistic attitudes and lacked a prominent female leader. Even though women truly were the foundation and the backbone of the party they never rose above their “place”. Women were often times found in the kitchen (free breakfast program), answering phones, and taking care of party members children. This is not to say they did not have a strong influence and did not participate actively in protests and speeches. However, their participation was not as free, and unbounded as they thought it would be when they joined the party. They faced many barriers such as sexual assault and harassment by other members of the party. In some instances, they had to wait to eat, food they had just cooked, until the men finished eating. They were subjected to the same level of brutality but police, and white men in charge, so one would think they would be granted equal power in combatting their oppressors in society. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Some women did carry weapons and march with their “brother”, some even gave public speeches – on the outside it appeared the party was giving women power to rise above their second-class citizen status. Appearances can be deceiving and a deeper look at the inner workings of the party refute those claims of gender equality.

Artists of Resistance



Women did find ways to subtly combat sexism within the party. To understand the role of women within the party it is important to start at the beginning. Each woman's experience was different, as were the means by which they combated sexism and misogyny that permeated the party. While few women joined the party to spark a gender revolution, many soon realized that their fight extended beyond combating racism. Tarika Joan Lewis had a much different mindset when she joined in 1967 at the young age of 16. Lewis did not realize at the time that she was the first female member<sup>4</sup>. She did not recognize the impact and the ripple affect her decision would have on black women within the Bay Area. She joined, not to fight for women's equality as she states the Black Panther Party is often times mixed in with the Women's Rights Movement. Instead, she joined to help the cause from a racial perspective. She quickly learned that there was inherent sexism within the party and began using her artistic abilities to depict women in the movement the same as men. The newspaper was undoubtedly a large source of revenue for the party. The graphic images, but most importantly the artwork depicted in the newspaper was crucial for the newspapers survival. Lewis played a huge part in facilitating some of the iconic artwork that would establish the continued success of the paper. Her artwork also shows a shift in the attitudes of women within the party. She started out with the intention of helping black families and children and combating racism and ended with powerful images and messages to combat gender inequality.

Artwork, song, literature all became a means for women to passively express themselves. Lewis was not the only one who used her gift of creativity to depict women as equal to men. Women like Gayle Dickinson also joined the movement as a means to fight racial oppression.

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<sup>4</sup> "Black Panthers at 50: What Was the Role of Women in the Black Panther Party?" Oakland Museum of California, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mixain1Smko](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mixain1Smko).

Dickinson was instrumental in contributing to the party's newspaper. The newspaper was essential to the survival of the party. After spending some time with the party realized that her creative talents need to be used to fight internal sexism. She published articles and drawings in the newspaper to make people aware of the plight of the African-American female, focusing a lot on the cycle of poverty. The arts became a peaceful, and healing way for women to give themselves a voice. While some women held leaderships roles, they were far and few. The leaders of the party were overwhelmingly male, even though women had a larger percentage of representation within the party. Not all women left their voices to be interpreted through political artwork and music.



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Many women did attempt to take an even more active role in protesting and literally exercising their voice, through the use of speeches. Angela Davis is a prime example of a woman who took active action in the fight. Not only did she arm herself, along with aiding others in obtaining weapons, she also gave passionate speeches. Davis was a woman on the front line, she went to protests, and became a very well known figure. Davis used rhetoric that instilled fear in the government and therefore she became a target. Davis believed that their revolution was justified using force, when necessary, because the black community was under continual violent attacks by white police, and even white citizens<sup>5</sup>. Those who write about Davis depict her as a black soldier. This is very important because, as stated before, women (especially black women) did not have a female leader for inspiration. Once Davis hit the scene, she became a strong, and powerful symbol for many women. With her newfound power Davis quickly became a target for hate. As the FBI, state government, and federal government began to see the Black Panther Party as a “threat” they started to make examples out of certain members. They targeted Davis, because of her image in the Black Panther Community. She had become a strong figure that was causing women to rethink their role in society. This re-shaping of the black, female “role” made many uncomfortable. She was already being oppressed and deemed a lesser person for the color of her skin, her gender, and now her party affiliation, “...Davis was a fugitive from injustice, from a vicious and systematic campaign to crush her spirit, her blackness...”<sup>6</sup> It was not only her blackness but the black power of womanhood that she embodied. Davis was an easy target because not only had she legally

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<sup>5</sup> Angela Davis Interview - 1972." [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuBqyBE1Ppw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuBqyBE1Ppw).

<sup>6</sup> "ANGELA DAVIS: BLACK SOLDIER." *The Black Scholar* 2, no. 3 (1970).  
<http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.scu.edu/stable/41202862>.

committed a crime but she was also a very vocal black woman. She wore her hair natural and did not conform. The government does not like those who do not conform. By attempting to crush her spirit, her femaleness, and her blackness they were attempting to suppress the revolution.

The party was revolutionary both externally (in society) but also internally. What women once viewed as a means to help their community and help combat racism transformed into a need to fight for gender rights and an end to sexual abuses and harassment within. The transformation did not stop at Party lines but instead it seeped in the long engrained societal notion of the black woman's "place" within the family.



A Woman's Place is on the Front Lines



A woman's role, based on societal norms was as a homemaker. The wife and mother would bear children and stay home and take care of them while the husband went to work. This ideology was changing for many mothers in the Black Panther Party. It was not changing because women necessarily wanted it to (they could have) but it was transforming out of necessity and loyalty to the Black Panther Party. There were two reasons for the disruption of the family unit within the Black Panther Party. The first was that women were inclined to work harder than their male counterparts to "prove" themselves. This led to women giving birth, dropping their child at the Party run Child Development Center (CDC)<sup>7</sup>, then going to work on the newspaper, cooking for the free lunch program, or whatever job was theirs before they gave birth. Black women within the Party became a new type of mother. This is not to say that mothers, outside of the Party, did not work. Due to the nature of being a black female within the Black Panther Party, these women held new responsibilities that took them away from their families. Many women within the Party were now sacrificing for their families not once, at home, but twice. They would work their day, or night, job (if they had one), go home to take care their children, and husband (if they had one), making their family dinner with what little they had (as a majority of these women were very poor). As the mother, and wife, of the household would often times go without food at home she only got the scraps at the Party because she is a woman. There are accounts of the men eating first while the "sisters" stand by and wait for the "brothers" to finish eating<sup>8</sup>. This is the perpetuation of the submissive female, the stereotypical black woman whose only job is to serve those around

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<sup>7</sup> "Black Panthers at 50: What Was the Role of Women in the Black Panther Party?"

<sup>8</sup> "Black Panthers at 50: What Was the Role of Women in the Black Panther Party?"

her. She had to be alert at all times, at home, in the community, at Party events and meetings. It had to be an exhausting lifestyle.

Being alert at all times, even paranoid sometimes, leads me to my second reason for the disruption of the family unit. The FBI, state government and federal government all became involved in the daily lives of prominent Party members. FBI agents would question family members of those affiliated with the Party. They began police raids on homes, “shoot-ins” by police were not as uncommon as we would like to hope. Needless to say, the home became a dangerous place. Many members men and women moved into what they called “Panther pads”. They left their families for their safety. The reasoning behind a mother leaving is noble – she wanted to protect her children and relatives. At the same time though, we see party loyalty becoming stronger and more intrusive. The black female must make a decision. Her option is to stay at home, putting her families lives in danger. She can leave the Party, seemingly giving up everything she has worked so hard for. Or she can move into a Panther pad temporarily. This is not to say that Panther pads were not dangerous. If the police found out the location of one they would raid it, throw noxious gas inside, or worse shoot it. The mothers who left to live in Panther pads chose Party loyalty above almost everything else. When they entered the Party I do not think this was a decision they thought they had to make. In the end the Party that they thought was fighting for their equality was just continuing a centuries long cycle of oppressing the black female.

Oppression has in many forms. It does not have to be the silencing of ones voice. It can be the slow smothering of a persons right to make a decision. The abuses that occurred outside of the Party against black female Panthers was horrific. The abuses that occurred inside were just as devastating. Take for example, Gayle Dickinson, a member of the Party. Dickinson tearfully

recalled having her first child shortly after joining the Party<sup>9</sup>. She chokes back tears as she remembers following the norm within the Party. New mothers, whose children could not help with the work, would place their child with the CDC. Her child was going to spend most of its first few months (possibly years) of life in the care of different women. The CDC was only there while the mother was working. Gayle did take her child home when she was done with her work for the Party. While this may not seem like abuse, it is at the very least coercive. Those at the top of the Party created a system that praised the submissive woman, the woman who was willing to sacrifice everything for the Party. black women within the Black Panther Party were now fighting societal norms of the black homemaker, internal norms of allowing their children to be raised by someone else while the work for the Party, and familial disruption due to the government.

### The Female, The Black, The Pantherette

The female gained the right to vote in the 1920's, the black men in 1869. The female Panther never gained that right within her Party. Her fight for her race quickly turned into a mad dash for equality in gender. The black female Panther wanted to be heard, she wanted her art to speak for generations, she wanted an equal seat at the table and the chance to prove herself. As women joined the movement, a majority, were not thinking their membership was going to turn into a new political movement. The women just wanted to do some good in their communities. The women involved faced oppression on multiple fronts and struggled to get ahead. The intersectionality of the black, female, Panther is a complex one. It is one that is worthy of study. The impact women had on the Party and society at the time is huge. Women have been silenced

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<sup>9</sup> "Black Panthers at 50: What Was the Role of Women in the Black Panther Party?" Oakland Museum of California, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIXain1Smko](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIXain1Smko).

for so long that they only people who make the headlines are men. If men are the main ones in the newspapers and the media, then it becomes default to study them and the impact they had. A closer look shows that women had just as strong, if not more influence, than many men as the foundation of the Party. I would even call the women in the Party the backbone of the Panther. Without the black, female, Panther the Party would have crumbled. There would be a much different discussion surrounding the Black Panther Party and the impact it had (or did not have) on society if women were not involved.

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